

Casting (Off) Reality

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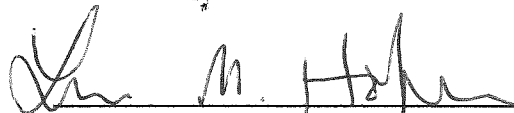
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Reality is defined as “the world or the state of things as they actually exist,”¹ which suggests that we are part of an objective realm or system that exists outside of ourselves. However, perceptions of this realm are subjective as they are filtered through the lenses of individual psyches and ideologies. According to psychoanalytic theory, the human psyche is comprised of consciousness and subconsciousness; we acknowledge consciousness as something that is real, whereas the subconscious remains latent and fantastic.² Iconic fiction writer, Ursula K. Le Guin, who is best known for her novel, *Cities of Illusions*, describes the subconscious as “the other side of our psyche, the dark brother of the conscious mind,”³ and within the subconscious, we cultivate internal conflicts, suppressed desires, and inscrutable fears. My artwork examines the realm of the subconscious through constructed symbols, such as puppets, shadows, and theatrical allusions; through the visual and contextual language of these symbols, I question the lines drawn between fiction and reality. My work explores the construction of personal realities, and I propose that perceived realities are reflections of the often denied subconscious, which is a critical component of reality. In the following sections, I examine Paul Klee’s influence on my artwork as I discuss his use of puppets and metaphor. I also explore my use of puppet and shadow symbols as they relate to psychoanalysis as I question the distinctions made between reality and fantasy, which parallels consciousness and subconsciousness.

¹ Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary. 11th ed. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 2003: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/>.

² Jung, C. G. and Joseph Campbell. “Phenomenology of the Self.” *The Portable Jung*, ed. Joseph Campbell. New York: Penguin, 1976: 23.

³ Le Guin, Ursula K. “The Child and the Shadow.” *The Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress* 32, no. 2. April 1975: 142. Jstor. Web. Accessed February 5, 2017: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29781619>.

Artist Influence

German Artist Paul Klee constructed around fifty puppets between the years of 1916 and 1925, and these puppets influence my artwork, for I also create whimsical, theatrical objects that function as metaphors and question the role of the subconscious. Klee originally created these hand puppets for his son Felix, and the first group of puppets reflects characters from a Munich flea market performance that Felix would attend twice a year. These performances enchanted and mesmerized the young boy, who longed to create his own puppet stories. In response, Klee designed and constructed a set of puppets that paralleled characters from the Punch and Judy performances.⁴ For Klee, his puppets function as metaphors for his own subverted childhood fears and desires. These objects symbolize dualisms that construct the space between the conscious and the subconscious.⁵ In 2006, Author and curator Christine Hopfengart published a comprehensive catalogue of Klee's hand puppets, and in this volume, she explores Klee's motivations:

His formal ideas are motivated by the wishes and fears of children, the traces of his own childhood, during which he was constantly faced with conflicts between the permissible and the forbidden, between the concepts of, as Klee says, 'good-evil'...The stage of life, its backdrops and arenas, the theater or theatrical, the dramaturgical and the staged—these all develop into metaphors and deepen the complex psychological horizons of human consciousness.⁶

In my thesis work, my puppets, when paired with their constructed shadows, also reference similar dualisms, personal desires and fears, and theatrical allusions. For me, the puppets in *Casting (Off) Reality* (Figure 1) represent a conscious reality, where as their shadows reflect my subconscious, and I present these staged pairing to an audience.

⁴ Hopfengart, Christine and Paul Klee. *Klee: Hand Puppets*. Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2006: 8.

⁵ Hopfengart, 25.

⁶ Hopfengart, 33.

Klee's use of metaphor also informs my work, for he is interested in the connection created by difference,⁷ for things that lack commonalities can be tied together just like things that are similar. In Klee's puppets, difference is created as he connects the playful, performative objects to dark childhood conflicts, desires, and fears. Viewers of these puppets are left to consider this connection, and it is within this space of contemplation that the metaphor comes to life. In the chapter "Paul Klee and the Fantasy of Synthesis," literary critic Ann C. Colley uses Klee's puppets to discuss this paradox of space that falls between the two aspects that form metaphors found in visual art and literature:

Metaphor, of course, also moves to bring disparate parts together. However, metaphor is not only involved in fusing the dissimilar; it also maintains difference, for without difference or without the spaces which fall between the "tenor" and the "vehicle," metaphor cannot come to life. The pleasure of the figure is that it leaves a gap between its parts in which the reader must supply the means of combining or tying together the incongruous details.⁸

In my thesis work, the two disparate elements linked to form metaphor are the colorful, light-hearted puppets and their dark, sinister shadows. The metaphor is then activated as viewers consider the space between the incongruous realms of reality and fantasy.

The Puppet

My interest in puppets begins with my grandfather, who regularly performed driveway puppet shows for all the children on the block. Even as a child, I was aware of a unique relationship between the puppet, puppeteer, and the audience. Through simple transformation of form and manipulation of body, my grandfather's hands embraced and became multitudes of characters. His body was well exposed as he sat behind the small

⁷ Colley, Ann C. "Paul Klee and the Fantasy of Synthesis." *The Kenyon Review*, Vol. 9, No. 3. Kenyon College, 1987: 1. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4335829>.

⁸ Colley, 2.

child's theatre, and it was obvious to the audience that my grandfather was the orchestrator of the fantasy; however, this realization did not affect our ability to suspend our disbelief.

Throughout these driveway performances, we made the puppets' realities our own, and we did not need to know where the puppets ended and where my grandfather began.

In my work, puppets function as toy-like objects that allude to play and reference transitional objects. They symbolize an audience's ability to be removed from reality and to be transported to realm of imagination, or fiction, where the subconscious can be accessed and revealed. Introduced by psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott in the 1950's, the term "transitional object" describes a prop, such as a puppet or toy, that is used by children to test reality as they develop self-awareness and a sense of the ego in relation to the "outer" world.⁹ Winnicott writes, "From birth...the human being is concerned with the problem of the relationship between what is objectively perceived and what is subjectively conceived."¹⁰ As children recognize this dilemma, they adopt transitional objects to bridge an inner and outer worlds: the "inner belonging to the unconscious and 'subjective reality'; the outer belonging to the environment and a 'shared reality.'"¹¹ During this early psychological phase, children first form relationships with objects and demonstrate elevated levels of sentimentality towards them; then, children recognize that these valued objects are separate from and outside the self. Finally, children assume mastery over their relationships with these objects as they further define their egos through a greater understanding of objective reality and subjective imagination.¹² This ability to separate reality and fiction parallels watching a play or puppet show, and I argue that the two realms inform one another and allow an audience to

⁹ Abram, 343.

¹⁰ Abram, 345.

¹¹ Abram, 346.

¹² Abram, 344.

question which is more “real”: the puppeteer with the transitional object on the driveway, or the subconscious fantasies and fears that are exposed through the manipulation of the puppets that resonate with the puppeteer and the audience.

In my thesis work, *Casting (Off) Reality*, the puppet-like characters aid in establishing the distinction between outer, shared realities and ever-present, yet often suppressed, subconscious thoughts, fears, and fantasies. To help reiterate that we often only acknowledge limited dimensions of our psyches, the puppets in *Casting (Off) Reality* are limited in physical depth. They are constructed from layered, thin, flat pieces of wood. Two to three layers of eighth-inch birch make up the front and back of these figures (Figure 3). The symbolic volume and essence of these characters is conveyed not only through their physical appearance, which is flat, but through their relationships to their shadows. The viewer is only offered a limited perspective of the characters and shadows, for they are both in profile, which reiterates the theme of limited perspectives of reality.

Puppets also represent power dynamics in my work. A puppet is seemingly lifeless and helpless until activated by a puppeteer, who takes on a god-like, all-knowing, all-powerful role. Puppeteers construct and control worlds of their own creations, which fosters a sense of liberation from the constraints of reality for both the puppeteer and the audience. The puppeteer’s ego is channeled through the manipulation of these toy-like objects, and subconscious truths and desires manifest in the characterization of the puppets. As the puppeteer controls the puppets, the puppets captivate and control the audience.

Power dynamics are also illustrated through the relationships between different allegorical characters, as seen in the classic puppet duo, Punch and Judy. Traditionally in the Punch and Judy performances, there is a history of violence and victimization. The

following excerpt is from John Payne Collier's transcription of a Punch and Judy show that was performed in England by Giovanni Piccini during the early decades of the nineteenth century:

PUNCH: Very well: then now come my turn to teach you. [*He snatches at, and struggles with her for the stick, which he wrenches from her, and strikes her with it on the head, while she runs about to different parts of the stage to get out of his way.*] How you like my teaching, Judy, my pretty dear? [*Hitting her.*]

JUDY: Oh pray, Mr. Punch. No more!

PUNCH: Yes, one little more lesson - [*Hits her again.*] There, there, there! [*She falls down with her head over the platform of the stage; and as he continues to hit at her, she puts up her hand to guard her head.*] Any more?

JUDY: No, no, no more! [*Lifting up her head.*]

PUNCH: [*Knocking down her head.*] I thought I should soon make you quiet.¹³

In my work, I utilize these character conventions to imply different power struggles and abuse that I have witnessed and experienced, particularly between men and women. In *Casting (Off) Reality*, the inanimate puppet objects depict seemingly innocent, loving personal relationships. A fair-haired female dressed in turquoise functions as the protagonist in each scene. She represents me and my experiences in the past, the present, and potential future. It is not necessary for viewers to know the fair-haired female is me; as with much of fiction, it can be difficult to discern where an author stops and where a character begins, and this allows readers and viewers to determine how much of the story is real or how much of the story is the illusion of reality. Ironically, I use the puppets to depict my realities, but the very nature of puppets suggests fiction and fantasy. The puppets in *Little Did She Know: Act I* (Figure 5) illustrate a playful relationship between me as a young girl and a father figure; his jointed and moveable arms lift the me, the child, into the air, simulating a father extending his daughter heavenward. The second series of puppets, *Little Did She Know: Act*

¹³ Collier, John Payne. "The Tragical Comedy, or Comical Tragedy, of Punch and Judy." *New England Review* (1990-) 21, no. 4, 2000: 199. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40243936>.

II (Figure 7), depicts me in the present as I am embraced by a group of seemingly close, jovial male and female friends. The final pairing, *Little Did She Know: Act III* (Figure 9), shows me as an old woman arching my back while dancing with a male partner. By themselves, these puppets appear to be the antithesis of negative or abusive relationships; however, each puppet group is paired with a fictitious archetypal shadow, and it is the potential in the pairing that conjures ideas of violence and victimization.

The puppets in *Casting (Off) Reality* are not meant to be played with; this is significant because it allows me, the artist, to maintain the role of the puppet master. I manipulate the puppets' moveable joints and leave the figures frozen in time and space upon their stages. Because they are not permitted to play with the puppets, viewers are denied pleasure and a sense of satisfaction. The viewer's inability to manipulate these figures also parallels the conscious ego's inability to access its subconscious.

The puppets serve as an entry point; however, metaphor and meaning develop as these sets of puppets are paired with their dissonant "shadows". I design and apply vinyl shadows of different fictitious archetypes to the wall behind each group of puppets. These shadows represent my subconscious, and viewers are left to question the relationship between the puppets and their shadows. Like the driveway audience watching my grandfather's puppet show, viewers consider their realities: what is real and what is fiction? Can lines really be drawn between the two? To me, we are puppets who are manipulated by our own constructed realities, and by drawing a physical connection between the puppets and their symbolic archetypal shadows, I illuminate the power of the subconscious.

The Shadow

While exploring types of puppetry, I became interested in shadow puppets; however, my interest in this form of puppetry lies in the symbolic nature of the puppet and the shadow. Instead of creating shadow puppets, I make puppets' shadows. My interest in the shadow stems from its power as metaphor; a shadow is a dark, two-dimensional representation of something, and it varies in form depending on the object's relationship to a light source and a surface. The person or object casting the shadow is the positive while its shadow is the negative counterpart. As with yin and yang, these contrary forces can be complimentary and can inform one another. In my thesis work, the metaphor created by linking light and shadow symbolize other dualisms, such as consciousness vs. subconsciousness, fact vs. fiction, objective vs. subjective, and good vs. evil. As light is tied to dark, we are also bound to our shadows; they are us, yet they are not us, and this relationship parallels how one can view reality and fantasy. For me, reality and fantasy are only as "real" or "fantastic" as we make them, and as with metaphor, it is the space between the two that one finds meaning.

The vinyl shadows in my work also reflect the writings of one of the fathers of psychoanalysis, Carl Jung, who extensively explores the aspect of the shadow and its relationship to the ego. He establishes the shadow as a representation of the subconscious; however, the conscious ego attempts to deny and fails to acknowledge this other realm.¹⁴ In his chapter "Psychology and Religion," Jung writes, "Everyone carries a shadow, and the less it is embodied in the individual's conscious life, the blacker and denser it is."¹⁵ To Jung, the shadow exists as a projected archetype that we tend to resist. We limit our access to the

¹⁴ Jung, C. G. and Joseph Campbell. "Phenomenology of the Self." *The portable Jung*, ed. Joseph Campbell. New York: Penguin, 1976: 147.

¹⁵ Jung, C. G. "Psychology and Religion." *Psychology and Religion: West and East, Collected Works 11*, ed. Michael Fordham. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, and Princeton, N.J.: Bollinger, 1953: 131.

subconscious, and therefore deny ourselves mastery over the relationship between the inner and outer world of consciousness. Thus, we remain incomplete as subverted thoughts, desires, and fears remain unaddressed.¹⁶ The more we ignore our dark subconscious, the more control it assumes over us. In “Phenomenology of the Self,” Jung describes the shadow as a physical entity that clouds our perceptions of reality:

The projection (the Shadow archetype) now has a free hand and can realize its objecthood...[and] can bring about some characteristic of its power. These projections insulate and harm individuals by acting as a constantly thickening veil of illusion between the ego and the real world.¹⁷

The puppets’ shadows in *Casting (Off) Reality* illustrate my own illusive subconscious fears and desires. I adopt author Ursula Le Guin’s idea of the shadow as a symbol of something that “stands on the threshold between the conscious and the unconscious mind...It is all we don’t want to, can’t admit to our conscious self, all the qualities and tendencies within us which have been repressed, denied, or not used.”¹⁸

Even though the colorful puppet characters are in focus and positioned in the foreground, they are dwarfed by the looming shadows cast against the wall. According to Jung, “The shadow personifies everything that the subject refuses to acknowledge about himself”;¹⁹ however, the scale of the shadows makes them unavoidable, and forces the viewer to acknowledge their power and existence. As the characters are unable to separate themselves from their shadows, viewers are unable to disregard the subconscious.

Under the overhead gallery lights, several *actual* shadows are cast. To me, these other shadows are symbolic of the separate roles we play in our own realities. At some point,

¹⁶ Jung, 133.

¹⁷ Jung and Campbell, 147.

¹⁸ Le Guin, 142.

¹⁹ Jung, C. G. “Psychology of the Transference.” *The Practice of Psychotherapy, Collected Works* 16. London, 1954: 219.

we are characterized as the victim, and in other scenarios, we are implicated as the perpetrator. Even though these puppet and shadows scenarios blur the lines between my own realities and fantasies, they are relatable to viewers, who, like an audience at a play, will project themselves into elements of the story.

Allusions to Theatrics and Fiction

In *Casting (Off) Reality*, I consider the puppets to be players on a raked stage, for I position them at the bottom of an inclined plane (Figure 2). The raked floor assists in the illusion of depth and space, which symbolizes the space between conscious reality and the subconscious. As in an actual raked stage, the incline also aids in creating a better view of the backdrop of shadows. Like an audience, viewers consider the relationship between fact and fiction and are implicated as potential puppets in the play of their own realities. This allusion to the stage conveys another interpretation of the concept of “play”, and further suggests that these toy-like characters are performative objects, or props, that symbolize objective perception but are then used to access realms of illusion and imagination. Winnicott insists that in the development of creativity, there must be specifically assigned spaces of the brain that are dedicated to “play”. In these spaces, reality and fantasy merge and grant us necessary insights to our psyches through glimpses of the subconscious.²⁰ As we interpret this merger, we perform and project our own semblances of reality, much like players on a stage.

²⁰ Podro, Michael. “Destructiveness and Play: Klein, Winnicott, Milner,” in *Winnicott and the Psychoanalytic Tradition: Interpretation and Other Psychoanalytic Issues*, ed. Lesley Caldwell. London: Karnac, 2007: 25. ProQuest ebrary. Web. February 8, 2017: <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/iupui/reader.action?docID=10464024&ppg=8>.

I further allude to literature and play as I illustrate fantastic animal archetypes in the shadows, for each scenario involves predatory, fantastic animals who victimize a female character. This dynamic between captor and victim parallels the use of animals in children's stories, such as *Grimm's Fairy Tales* or *Aesop's Fables*. In her essay, "The Child and the Shadow," Le Guin discusses the use of animals in *Grimm's Fairy Tales* and concludes that animals are utilized in this form of fiction for two main reasons: first, they are easily accessible and enticing for children; most of these tales are told to teach a lesson, so they must also be seductive and entertaining. Secondly, it can be easier to accept a possibly painful lesson when one is not immediately implicated. Even though the animals in these tales are clearly fictitious and separate from conscious reality, we are more likely to project the story onto ourselves if there is a removal from everyday life, giving us space for reflection.²¹ As suggested by Jung, these connections are made in the creative realms of the brain, often in the subconscious, so they impact the experiencer on a deeper level.²² The fantastic animals in my shadows allude to these elements of fairy tales and other power dynamics in fiction.

The use of these animal archetypes also reflects the untamed subconscious, for as theorist Gilles Deleuze writes regarding the dark nature of Francis Bacon's visceral and lascivious paintings, "The shadow escapes from the body like an animal we have been sheltering."²³ Furthermore, like a child's fairy tale, what we initially perceive as light and innocent may prove to be dark and sinister. As we project our conscious selves as players in our own constructed realities, we often fail to acknowledge that our dark subconscious is just as "real", and when experiencing these pieces, viewers construct their own understandings of

²¹ Le Guin, 135.

²² Jung and Campbell, 148.

²³ Deleuze, Gilles. *Francis Bacon: the logic of sensation*. London: Continuum, 2012: 47

reality as they choose how to relate to these offerings of my subconscious shadows. For example, in *Little Did She Know: Act I*, the puppets “cast” the shadow of a little girl being threateningly held up by the ankle by a menacing, baboon-like beast (Figure 4). The girl’s dress is flipped over her head, and her soft and private underside is exposed. Her skirt functions as a blindfold, and she is also unable to see or resist her attacker in this helpless state. Symbolically, the girl is caught in the dark and unable to “see” the true intentions of the man-beast. At this point, the girl is completely vulnerable and at the mercy of the open-mouthed, fanged beast. The foreground, conscious “reality” scene that depicts trusting playfulness is turned upside down as the girl assumes the role of a prostrated victim who is unable to escape the masculine authority figure. In the second piece in the series, *Little Did She Know: Act II*, the friends’ loving embrace is exposed as an act of suffocation as the female in the shadow is seized and strangled by the three-headed snake who’s body coils and winds around her body (Figure 6). Viewers can relate to the strangled girl or the three-headed snake that holds the girl back. Finally, in *Little Did She Know: Act III*, a pouncing wolf looms above an exposed, helpless woman. This shadow alludes to a fear of intimacy and commitment, for it is cast by the puppet representation of me as an elderly woman being held in her dancing partner’s embrace (Figure 8).

The titles of the three puppet-shadow scenarios also allude to theatrics, for they are broken up into separate acts: *Little Did She Know: Act I*, *Act II*, and *Act III*, and these acts represent the three points of a linear plotline: beginning, middle, and end. As in plays, these acts revolve around conflicts that make characters aware of something poignant, and this discovery is essential to the growth of the character and the development of the plot. throughout the progression of the narrative. The struggles between woman and beast

depicted in the shadows illustrate literal conflict; however, the overarching conflict lies in the viewers' struggle to discern where reality stops and where fantasy begins. As the artist, I am conflicted by our need to make such a distinction between the two.

The "Little Did She Know" portion of the title functions as foreshadowing, for this phrase suggests that something will be revealed to a character, but only after it is too late in the plot for the character to change the situation. This work symbolizes my feelings of helpless frustration caused by an inability to discern fact from fiction, reality from fantasy, and I am caught in various stages of "Little did she (or I) know."

Conclusion

As I question the distinctions between reality and fantasy, I present viewers with symbolic puppets and shadows that when paired together develop a metaphor for the realms of consciousness and subconsciousness. Within the space between these two seemingly disparate concepts, viewers draw conclusions about my personal "realities", while also questioning their own. I also allude to literary and theatrical elements to further convey that we construct our own realities. In *Casting (Off) Reality*, I am the puppeteer; the gallery is the set; the puppet-shadow scenarios catalyze conflict; and the viewers function as both the audience and the players. I play with the ideas of reality and fantasy as I ground my artwork in the credible space of the gallery. What I depict is as important as what I do not depict, as we tend to construct our own semblance of reality. Viewers look through the lenses of their own shadows and engage with *Casting (Off) Reality*. At this point, the shadow archetypes become part of viewers' own realities. As they consider my pairings of suggested reality and illusion, they are left to discern their own roles in both as they acknowledge their conscious perceptions and their subconscious conceptions. Despite the frequent denial of the

subconscious, or the inability to access it, our darker and sinister sides are always with us as shadows upon the wall.

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Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9